

Vouchers? No, there are better alternatives.

Vouchers are often proposed as a means to help children “escape failing public schools.” NEA believes a better approach involves strategies to transform those schools so that they can become enriching environments for teaching and learning and community involvement. This is far more effective and can even be less expensive than vouchers, which do little or nothing to improve the lives of either the students who receive them or the thousands of children they would leave behind.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

What is a voucher? Private school vouchers are any form of public payment to help parents send their children to private schools, including religious schools. They may take the form of direct government payments to parents, tax credits parents can take for tuition payments, or “scholarships” from nonprofit organizations that receive donations for which the donors, in turn, receive a tax credit. Voucher supporters use terms with marketing appeal such as “opportunity scholarships” and “parental choice” because they know the word “voucher” costs them public support.

Vouchers do not enhance student achievement

Official evaluations of voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., have all found no statistically significant differences in the academic achievement of voucher students compared to public school students.¹ Private education thus is not the “magic bullet” that will miraculously improve student achievement. Indeed, public school students have actually been found to *outperform* private school students when test scores are weighted to reflect socioeconomic level, race, and disability.²

Furthermore, vouchers do not improve public schools by creating competition.³ A survey of research on the subject found that competition from vouchers (and charter schools) had no more impact on student achievement and efficiency than did competition from private schools and proximate public schools in traditional, non-choice environments.⁴ Although advocates for vouchers have released publications claiming that competition forces public schools to improve and be more efficient, reviews of their analysis have revealed that the assertions lack credibility.⁵

Vouchers do not save money

Taxpayers do not save money when students use a voucher to transfer to a private school. Instead, they end up paying for two systems, one public and accountable and the other private. Because school districts are unable to reduce fixed costs such as salaries and benefits for staff, transportation services, maintenance, utilities, and supplies, they do not benefit financially when a few students spread across different grade levels leave a public school for a voucher school. Instead, those students take their entire per pupil expenditure with them, leaving the school to fund its programs and staff with fewer public dollars. So-called “savings” are further reduced by the number of students using vouchers who would have attended private school even without the subsidy.⁶ In Cleveland, two-thirds

of voucher users attended private school the year before they received the voucher, while in Washington, D.C., 216 of the 1,366 vouchers issued the first year of that city's program went to students already attending private school.⁷

Another issue is the cost to taxpayers for the fraud, waste, and abuse that has plagued voucher programs. Because accountability in these programs has been consistently lax, millions of tax dollars have been lost to private school operators who fraudulently misrepresented enrollment data, failed to provide safe and academically appropriate learning environments, and otherwise gamed the system for personal profit.⁸ The oversight needed to monitor voucher programs would cost more and add another layer of bureaucracy to the education system, assuming such entanglement in the operation of private schools were even permitted.

What would work better than vouchers?

Using school improvement strategies to target specific needs is academically and fiscally more effective than vouchers, which are not designed to fix problems or serve all students.

State and federal accountability systems help schools identify at what grade level and in what subjects students need help. A variety of resources are available to school districts, educators, parents, and other stakeholders to identify programs that have been proven effective at improving student achievement. Knowing the problem and what programs have been proven effective at addressing those problems facilitates the development of school improvement plans that focus resources where they are most needed.

- **What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)** assesses the rigor of research evidence on the effectiveness of interventions, produces user-friendly practice guides for educators, and administers

a registry of education researchers who are available to help schools, school districts, and program developers design and conduct rigorous evaluations. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

- **The National Center for Education Evaluation** conducts unbiased large-scale evaluations of education programs and practices supported by federal funds; provides research-based technical assistance to educators and policymakers; and supports the synthesis and the widespread dissemination of the results of research and evaluation throughout the United States. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee>
- **The Regional Educational Laboratory Program** is a network of 10 laboratories that serves the educational needs of designated regions by providing access to high-quality, scientifically valid education research through applied research and development projects, studies, and related technical assistance activities. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/index.asp>
- **The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center (CSRQ)** evaluated comprehensive school reform models and education service providers, and in 2006, issued reports summarizing its findings. www.csrq.org/reports.asp

NEA opposes vouchers

Vouchers are not a strategy to improve student achievement, and the National Education Association has consistently and unequivocally opposed voucher plans, tuition tax credits, and other funding arrangements that pay for students to attend private schools. The Association further opposes any privatization arrangement that would weaken the wall of separation between church and state, support segregation, or otherwise undermine public education.

References

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